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HEADLINE: Md. Ethics Committee Sets Focus On Currie

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BODY:

Apparent violations of state ethics laws by Sen. Ulysses Currie will be scrutinized by a Maryland legislative ethics committee, even if the Prince George's County Democrat is cleared in an ongoing federal investigation, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. said yesterday.

Federal prosecutors are examining whether Currie, chairman of the powerful Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, improperly used his office to benefit the grocery chain Shoppers Food and Pharmacy. Currie did not disclose his work as a consultant for the company on state financial forms at a time when records show he was helping the Lanham company in dealings with the state.

Miller (D-Calvert) said in an interview that he was "certain" that Currie should have disclosed his consulting work. Miller also said a Maryland ethics law prohibits legislators from acting as paid lobbyists of the executive branch.

According to court documents, Currie began working for Shoppers in early 2003 and was paid more than \$207,000 from that time until 2007. Among his activities were prodding state transportation officials on installing traffic signals and approving a parking lot entrance.

"On the surface, it appears clearly an ethics law has not been adhered to," Miller said. "Regardless of what the

federal government does, this will be an issue taken up by the Joint Committee on Legislative Ethics."

The General Assembly's ethics committee may recommend sanctions, including censure or expulsion of a member. There are no civil or criminal penalties associated with violating the state ethics law at issue.

The last time the full Senate voted to expel one of its members was 1998, after Larry Young, a Democrat from Baltimore, was accused of abusing his office. Young was later acquitted by a jury of bribery and tax evasion charges.

Currie declined to comment yesterday. An associate of Dale P. Kelberman, an attorney representing Currie, said Kelberman was not available for a comment.

A legislative investigation of Currie's actions would not start before the federal investigation ends, Miller said.

Miller said he is hopeful that Currie will not be charged in the case. "Until he's charged, he continues to be a trusted member of the Maryland Senate," Miller said.

Miller, however, acknowledged the possibility that Currie could be replaced as chairman of the budget committee, at least temporarily, before the legislature reconvenes in January.

Currie and Miller are likely to face increasing pressure from colleagues in coming weeks about Currie's leadership of the budget committee. Despite a series of tax increases and spending cuts last year, lawmakers are bracing for more reductions as a weak economy has led to a decline in tax revenue.

Miller said yesterday that he would like to convene joint hearings with the House on the budget situation as early as next month, a move that could intensify the public spotlight on Currie at a time when the outcome of the federal investigation is unclear.

While none of Currie's colleagues have called publicly for his ouster as chairman, several have said privately that they do not expect him to survive in the post until January. Some colleagues also have expressed concerns about the effect of the investigation on the Senate's image.

"Senator Currie loves the Maryland Senate," Miller said. "I'm quite confident that before he would allow people to think less of the Maryland Senate, he would take whatever measures are appropriate without me asking him to."

Miller said he believes it is important to have a public airing of potential budget cuts. Legislative analysts said recently that the state could face a shortfall of \$200 million in its \$1.5 billion general fund for fiscal 2009, which started last month.

The gap could grow when new revenue projections are released early next month, Miller said. "Judging by all economic indicators, the revenue estimates are not going to be good," he said.

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